

Appendix B - Residential Infill Development and Redevelopment

The high quality of life and the convenient location of the City of Fairfax have caused the City to become highly valued as a place to live. The City's desirability is evidenced not only by the increased value of its existing homes, but also by the increased value of its residential land (both vacant lots and occupied lots that have potential for redevelopment or re-subdivision).

The purpose of this section of the Comprehensive Plan is to begin to create a formal City policy regarding the intensification of residential development that has begun to take place within the City of Fairfax. The intent is to guide development into forms that honor the established development patterns and characteristics that have served the City well, while allowing enhancements and upgrades of the City's residential stock to promote the City's competitive position within the region.

The intensification of the City's residential areas will likely take two main forms: infill development and the redevelopment of lots that already contain residences. The term "infill" in its simplest form refers to development on vacant land surrounded by developed land. Infill can be accomplished by subdividing a large lot into smaller lots or by building a house on a lot that has always been vacant. Residential redevelopment can involve the removal of one or more residences and the replacement with new residences or simply the construction of building additions to enlarge an existing dwelling. Redevelopment can either make a neighborhood a better place to live or introduce new house forms that are incompatible with those in the existing neighborhood. Because current housing market preferences favor homes that are relatively large, redevelopment has its greatest impacts in older neighborhoods with small homes. By definition, nearly all forms of redevelopment would have the effect of intensifying development within the City, resulting in some change in the City's highly valued residential character. The application of appropriate redevelopment guidelines should allow these inevitable processes to be undertaken in a manner that reinforces the City's positive qualities while allowing for the needed replenishing of the residential stock.

To avoid the pitfalls of infill development and redevelopment, a clear set of principles is needed to be established and followed, leading to clear expectations of what constitutes a satisfactory infill development/redevelopment and what would compromise the City's desirable residential character. It is equally important to define the potential benefits that the various types of infill or redevelopment could create and the possible problems to be avoided. Most importantly, before any action is taken on any proposed infill development or redevelopment, it is important to reach a clear understanding of the City's residential areas, including their current strengths and weaknesses, and to gain a vision for what the residential areas could become.

Existing Conditions

The vast majority of the City's present-day residential stock was built since the end of World War II, primarily between 1945 and 1970. In fact, 68 percent of existing single-family detached homes in Fairfax were built between 1950 and 1964 alone. While most of these homes are well maintained and capable of continuing to serve their original use well, many no longer satisfy the preferences of homebuyers in a competitive market. Many of the City's postwar houses have two bedrooms, one or two bathrooms, and single-story floor plans with less than 1,500 square feet of floor area. While keeping these houses occupied has not yet become a problem, a potential exists for many smaller, older houses to gradually convert to rental stock and/or fall into disrepair – a condition that can both accelerate redevelopment and lead to a deterioration in general neighborhood cohesion.

Direct replacement of some houses is likely to occur in any event, although in some cases large-scale rebuilding of a neighborhood is possible. In many cases, this process will result in dwelling units and neighborhoods that leave the City better positioned in the rapidly evolving Northern Virginia housing market. Unfortunately, the size or form of some of the newly developed homes are likely to conflict with neighboring residences, especially those that contribute positively to the City's residential atmosphere.

Recent Actions

Over the past several years, City Council and the Planning Commission have both examined issues pertaining to infill housing and redevelopment. This examination has included a review of various options available for regulating those aspects of infill development that can cause visible incompatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods, focusing on tools available to control the size or bulk of infill housing units.

An eventual approach to the issue of new houses being built in existing neighborhoods may require a combination of options, possibly customized for individual neighborhoods.

Recommendations

- 1) Analyze all existing neighborhoods to identify the important characteristics of development that reinforce positive neighborhood image and function; seek neighborhood input to assure that the characteristics identified reflect neighbor opinions specific to the neighborhood itself.
- 2) Create “pattern books” for some of the larger neighborhoods of detached houses, including guidelines for lot design, house scale, building form, architectural details and building materials for redevelopment that is compatible with existing homes, lots and streetscapes. Integrate the pattern books into the development approval process.
- 3) Identify areas of the City for priority redevelopment based on the percentage of structures with obsolete characteristics that are likely to lead to a long-term decline in the general upkeep of City residences.
- 4) Direct highest density development/redevelopment to areas near major corridors and where residents can walk to restaurants and shopping, avoiding the need to pass through low-density areas.
- 5) In cases of wholesale neighborhood redevelopment/subdivision replacement, encourage uses that are compatible with surrounding development and that will promote the City’s fiscal stature.
- 6) Revise the City’s zoning ordinance as necessary to ensure that the ordinance promotes the guidelines and allows the design features proposed in the pattern books while allowing flexibility and creativity in designing viable new residences.
- 7) Direct special attention to the siting of infill/redeveloped lots to minimize conflicts with views from pre-existing development. Direct new development to fit within the existing system of streets to the extent possible.
- 8) Balance neighborhood sentiment, which will often be anti-infill/redevelopment, with landowners’ rights to effectively develop the property and the City’s need for a regionally competitive housing stock.
- 9) Even in cases of proposals that greatly increase density, ensure the preservation or replacement of the City’s tree canopy. Give special attention to preserving existing trees that mitigate the impact of infill or redevelopment proposals that would increase building density or intensity.
- 10) Rely on the power of negotiation to achieve desirable results, rather than using the strict application of code as the ultimate determinant of compatibility or appropriateness.

Some considerations related to redevelopment issues

- A long-term increase in overall City density may possibly help to control housing prices within the City and the surrounding area by helping supply meet long-term demand.
- Recent demographic trends within the City indicate a bifurcation of household types resulting in more large households and more households with only one or two residents.
- The City has a relatively small rental apartment market, much of which is approaching the end of its peak productive life and/or has an outdated appearance.